



RED VINES RISING

*Austria's fresh and versatile red wines
are ready for prime time.*

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Though Austria is largely known for producing outstanding white wines, more than one-third of the country's vineyards, or nearly 39,000 acres, are planted to red grapes. Most of that is dedicated to indigenous varieties, adapted both to climate and soil.

At first glance, their names might look like an unfamiliar barrage of consonants. But grapes such as Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt and St. (or Sankt) Laurent, as well as increasingly subtle versions of Pinot Noir, are worthy of your attention.

Austrian red wines are perfect matches for the trends of today. They fit that lighter, food-friendly paradigm of reds that offer toned silhouettes, with textures ranging from silky smooth to velvety. And their power is more often expressed aromatically than through a brute tannic structure, while bright acidity highlights every nuance of fruit and spice.

These red wines offer unique expressions of quality, from joyful and fruit-forward picnic-ready pours to ageworthy, single-vineyard selections. It's time to explore these Austrian originals and discover the bottles to try now.

Blaufränkisch

Blaufränkisch is the archetypal Austrian red: juicy and spicy, in a bold yet well-defined package. Its fruit spectrum ranges from tart plum and cherry to rich blueberry, with an alluring hint of white pepper. It performs a careful high-wire act between inky, spicy opulence and sinuous slenderness, all balanced by an ample seam of bright acidity. The best wines also have floral overtones and the effortless ability to age.

Blaufränkisch buds early and ripens late. It's at home in Austria's continental climate, particularly in the eastern regions of Carnuntum and Burgenland, where warm, continental Eastern European air meets cooler, Alpine breezes. Blaufränkisch suitably expresses these opposites, meaning both generosity and freshness are inherent in the resulting wines. The variety thrives in the dry, sandy loams of Spitzerberg in Carnuntum, in the limestone and schist combinations of Leithaberg, in the heavy loams of Mittelburgenland and in the slate and schist soils of Eisenberg. The latter three are *Districtus Austriae Controllatus* (DACs), or regional appellations, that are dedicated exclusively to the grape for red-wine production.

Erwin Tinhof, who makes Blaufränkisch in the Leithaberg Mountains at Weingut Tinhof, says that the grape adapts to its surroundings.

"Its thick skin protects it from botrytis during its long ripening," he says. "Great wine needs acidity, and Blaufränkisch has a lot of it; combined with ripe tannins, this gives tension, wonderful balance and elegance to the wine."

Farther south in Eisenberg, Mathias Jalits makes ageworthy, expressive Blaufränkisch from vines grown in slate soils, which bestow power and finesse to the wines. He says the grape's acidity allows the wine to be both delicate and firmly structured.

Dorli Muhr, who crafts elegant Blaufränkisch on the Spitzerberg, says that it took a while for the Austrians to recognize what a treasure they had in the grape. In the past, it was prized for its ability to yield quality wines of longevity, but in the 20th century, "it was seen as a kind of peasant wine," says Muhr. "It was considered too acidic, too rough. By now, people have recognized that Blaufränkisch is a kind of Austrian red-wine DNA, but only if there is precision in vineyard and winery. Overripeness, over-extraction, too much wood and winemaker ego—none of these suit Blaufränkisch."

The variety works with or without oak, but winemakers have dialed back the use of small new barrels to better showcase the grape. It's often described as positioned at the stylistic intersection of Pinot Noir, Syrah and Gamay. So if you like any of these varieties, Blaufränkisch is worth exploration.



95 Muhr-Van der Niepoort 2015 Ried Spitzerberg Blaufränkisch (Carnuntum). Highly aromatic notions of cinnamon-dusted blueberry and plum rise from the glass. The richness of that scent is countered on the palate by ample freshness, which gives clean delineation to the fruit flavors and lends precision to the body. This is taut at present, but flavors run deep. There seems to be a floral core of peony and berry that still needs to unfold—elegance and depth are to come. Drink 2022–2035. Blue Danube Wine Co. **Cellar Selection.**
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$65

95 Tinhof 2015 Gloriette Blaufränkisch (Burgenland). Gentle, seductive aromatics combine subtle vanilla, peony and ripe dark cherry on the nose. The palate is full, but fresh—svelte one moment, plush the next. There's something seamless in the way the flavors merge, unimpeded by the tannins and their velvety crunch. Highly accomplished, very elegant and quite irresistible. Drink 2020–2035. Carlo Huber Selections. **Cellar Selection.**
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$80

94 Gernot and Heike Heinrich 2015 Blaufränkisch (Leithaberg). Fresh, almost pristine black cherry beckons from the glass, followed by a gentle whiff of wood smoke. The medium-bodied palate has the same combination of pristine freshness and gentle oak. It shows fresh-faced fruit laced by whisper tannins and delineated by vivid acidity. This is a wonderfully elegant wine with a real force of life inside it. Drink now–2030. Craft + Estate—The Winebow Group.
abv: 13% **Price:** \$45

94 Jalits 2015 Diabas Reserve Blaufränkisch (Eisenberg). Lovely notes of black cherry on the nose have a pleasant edge of bitter almond. The palate is dense with that same aromatic cherry, and it has ample power and concentration to make this a rather muscular, potent wine. The tannins are fine and have a soft but distinct grip, with a warming, long finish. Drink 2022–2032. KWSelection.com. **Cellar Selection.**
abv: 14% **Price:** \$71

94 Prieler 2015 Blaufränkisch (Leithaberg). A touch of tar, a hint of bitter almond and brooding black cherry fruit mark the nose and spread freely across the palate with dark, delicious intent. This is dense and firm with drying tannins, but no heaviness. There's freshness and intensity to the dark, brooding fruit that will show its true colors with some more age—but its aromatic promise is already here. Drink 2020–2035. Skurnik Wines, Inc. **Cellar Selection.**
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$50

93 Esterházy 2015 Ried Föllig Blaufränkisch (Leithaberg). The nose is still closed and shy, just giving off hints of cherry. The palate is also taut and tightly coiled. Fine, taut tannins are still drying and firm, the fruit is still enclosed with brisk freshness. There's a dense core of fruit that still needs to unfold. This is powerful, but it remains resolutely elegant. Give this time to come into its own. Drink 2022–2030. Wein Bauer Inc.
abv: 14% **Price:** \$50

St. Laurent

St. Laurent may be Austria's most tricky red grape to cultivate, but it's worth the effort. Michael Reinisch, of Johanneshof Reinisch in the Thermenregion, is a master at turning out well-balanced and nuanced expressions of the grape. He describes St. Laurent as having "darker fruit aromas, reminiscent of sour cherry and blackberry, with a distinct savoriness, fresh acidity and firm tannin."

Legend has it that the grape was named after St. Lawrence, a deacon of Rome in the 3rd Century, whose birthday of August 10 is when the grape generally begins to ripen and turn red in the vineyard.

Reinisch says that St. Laurent needs very particular conditions; if soils are too rich, there's too much vigor and all effort goes into the shoots. As a result, his vines are planted on stonier soils. The grape also requires careful canopy management, and timing its harvest is crucial. "Growing Sankt Laurent is a challenge we are happy to take on," says Reinisch.

Johannes Trapl, who makes delicate St. Laurent in Carnuntum, says he has a "love-hate relationship" with the grape.

"Its airs and graces in the vineyard are a challenge that you immediately forget when

you taste the wine," he says. Like Reinisch, Trapl says that cool breezes and cold nights are important, as are well-ventilated sites, since its skins are thin and susceptible to fungal disease. He uses cover crops to compete for water and nutrients that control vigor and balance fruit set and ripening.

Yields are often unstable, and an incredibly selective harvest is necessary. "It takes three times as long [to harvest]," says Trapl. But his description of the finished wine is almost lyrical: "Layered with aromatic, often floral depth and structured on the palate, but with charming, silky tannin." Fans of Pinot Noir should take a look at this slightly darker Austrian charmer.

94 Johanneshof Reinisch 2015 Holzspur St. Laurent (Thermenregion). Circo Vino.
abv: 13.5% **Price:** \$80

94 Steindorfer 2015 Reserve St. Laurent (Burgenland). KWSelection.com.
abv: 13% **Price:** \$37

94 Trapl 2015 Reserve St. Laurent (Carnuntum). Dry Farm Wines.
abv: 12.5% **Price:** \$26

93 Stift Klosterneuburg 2015 St. Laurent (Thermenregion). Boutique Wine Collection.
abv: 13% **Price:** \$25



Zweigelt

Zweigelt is Austria's red success story. A cross between Blaufränkisch and St. Laurent, it was originally bred at the Federal Institute of Viticulture and Pomology at Klosterneuburg in 1922, and is now Austria's most widely planted red variety.

Zweigelt is not as demanding as either of its parents when it comes to site selection. It's grown across the country and can deliver high yields. It also ripens earlier and runs the gamut of styles, from simple and unoaked to serious, concentrated and nuanced.

Regardless of its style, it always shows its cherry charm.

"We really love this variety," says Heidi Fischer, co-owner at Weingut R&A Pfaffl, which also produces The Dot brand and labels its Zweigelt "Austrian Cherry."

"It is so fruity, fresh and soft," she says. "With its exuberant cherry fruit, it makes such a drinkable, enjoyable wine."

This approachability, often paired with remarkable affordability, is part of Zweigelt's appeal, though it can also label the grape as somewhat unambitious. Today, many producers, including The Pfaffls, also make more serious Zweigelts from single sites.

"These wines are more robust and have a lovely pepperiness to them, but we want the cherry flavor to come through," says Fischer.

Zweigelt is the basis for the wines of the Neusiedlersee DAC in Burgenland as well as Carnuntum's regional red known and often labeled as Rubin Carnuntum. Franz Schneider, director of Artisan Wines in Burgenland, says Zweigelt from Neusiedlersee is reflective of the region's sunny climate and diverse soils.

"Heavy loams result in dark cherry notes, ripe Morello and even cassis, while lighter soils tend towards brighter cherry notes and black pepper," he says.

Schneider believes that Zweigelt is "a wine for every day, rounded and fruit-forward, with a velvety tannin structure." But he also advises aging, especially for the DAC Reserve category. "The best thing about Zweigelt is the diversity of styles it can deliver," he says.

In Carnuntum, southeast of Vienna, Winemaker Christina Artner Netzl, of Weingut Franz & Christine Netzl, agrees. "This grape can do anything, depending on site, vine-age and farming," she says.

Netzl is amongst those that make complex, layered, single-vineyard wines

from the grape. "Few people trust Zweigelt to achieve real quality, and unfortunately, it still has the reputation of an easy guzzling wine," she says. "But it is all down to the grapes in the vineyard."

Restricted yields and a gentle approach in the cellar are key to coax the best out of the grape. "Too much concentration, ripeness and wood easily overwhelm Zweigelt," says Netzl.



93 Artner 2016 Ried Steinäcker Zweigelt (Carnuntum). Shy aromas of wet stone and black cherry mark the nose. The palate shows a levity of juicy fruit, yet also a deep well of black cherry richness that needs opening up amidst the shyness and gentle gauze of fine tannins. The long finish seems to promise further development. A lovely, well-judged and rather elegant wine. Drink now–2028. Vintners Alliance. **abv:** 14% **Price:** \$45

93 Netzl 2015 Ried Haidacker Zweigelt (Carnuntum). A shy, restrained nose hints at red cherry, red plum and cherry juice. The palate, on the other hand, brims with fresh, aromatic cherries: black and red, ripe and luscious. It's the slender freshness and appealing texture of fine tannin that makes this elegant and desirable. It's a wonderfully concentrated wine, but somehow understated despite its juiciness. KWSelection.com. **abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$65

92 Artisan Wines DI Franz Scheider 2015 Reserve Zweigelt (Neusiedlersee). This wine is very aromatic on the nose, with notes of dark mulberry and tangy nettle. The palate has the same intensity of fruit and herb—concentrated but not heavy, full-bodied without being rich. This strikes a most lovely balance and convinces with freshness. Steep Hill Importing. **abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$20

92 Schloss Gobelsburg 2015 Reserve Zweigelt (Niederösterreich). There's an intriguing, aromatic quality of nettle amidst the ripe, red cherry flavors on the nose. The palate has an inviting, sinuous slenderness, with still slightly grippy but fine tannin. Red cherry ripples across the palate, given precision and vibrancy by lovely, taut freshness. It's such an elegant but lively wine, full of joy and measure. Skurnik Wines, Inc. **abv:** 13% **Price:** \$38

90 The Dot 2016 Austrian Cherry Zweigelt (Niederösterreich). Although restrained on the nose, this wine leads with lovely, sprightly fresh flavors. Its tannins provide grip and are just a little drying, which offset the red berry and cherry notes. It's balanced, fresh and tantalizing in its cherry-toned fruit. Try it with a slight chill. Esprit du Vin. **Best Buy.** **abv:** 12.5% **Price:** \$14

90 Zantho 2015 Reserve Zweigelt (Burgenland). A flinty note of reduction hovers above the ripe, fleshy aromas of red and black cherries. The palate drives home the ripe and abundant cherry fruit on a concentrated, fresh palate. The finish has ample fruit, but also levity. Gonzalez Byass USA. **abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$25

Pinot Noir

Pinot Noir, or Blauburgunder, may not be indigenous to Austria, but it's allegedly been cultivated there since medieval times. With around 1,600 acres planted, it's only grown where it can thrive. There is some Pinot Noir in Burgenland, but Niederösterreich, or lower Austria, offers intriguing Pinot-friendly pockets in Wagram, Thermenregion and Vienna itself.

"The fact that two climatic zones collide, the warm Pannonian influence from the east and the cool-continental influence from northwest, is decisive for our style, as are the cool nights," says Heinrich Hartl III, of his namesake estate in the Thermenregion, just south of Vienna. "In late summer, the nights are cool, which allows aromatic synthesis and, therefore, ripeness with a concurrent freshness. This way, we get elegant wines that are well-structured, but not green."

Hartl is among the young winemakers that fine-tune their approach to this fickle variety. His vines are grown on calcareous subsoils, and he uses partial whole-berry and whole-bunch ferments to craft subtle wines where savoriness is as important as fruit. He says that constant eastern and northerly winds help keep botrytis at bay.

95 Anton Bauer 2014 Reserve Limited Edition Pinot Noir (Wagram). KWSelection.com. **abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$55

94 Wienering 2015 Select Pinot Noir (Vienna). Craft + Estate—The Winebow Group. **abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$33

93 Bründlmayer 2015 Reserve Pinot Noir (Niederösterreich). Terry Theise Estate Selections. **abv:** 13.5% **Price:** \$73

93 Heinrich Hartl 2014 Graf Weingartl Pinot Noir (Thermenregion). KWSelection.com. **abv:** 13% **Price:** \$47

Northwest of Vienna, in the deeper loess soils of the Wagram, Anton Bauer in Feuersbrunn also says that various factors play into a good Pinot Noir vineyard. While his sites are southern-facing and warm, his Pinot vineyards are on well-ventilated slopes. The loess soils his vines are grown on are water-retentive, but they're also well drained.

Both Bauer and Hartl have impressions as to what's particularly Austrian about their Pinot Noirs. "Fruit, depth and creaminess," says Bauer, while Hartl asserts it's the ripe fruit in combination with freshness.

In blind tastings of international Pinot Noir lineups, however, it's the elegance that stands out most in Austrian examples.